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ABSTRACT

This ERIC digest focuses on students who are commonly described as shy (inhibited, lacking in confidence, socially anxious) or withdrawn (unresponsive, uncommunicative, or daydreaming). Symptoms of shyness or withdrawal may appear as part of the student's overall personality or as a situation-specific response to a particular stress factor. Strategies for coping with shy or withdrawn students include: (1) peer involvement (e.g., involving shy students in cross-age tutoring programs); (2) teacher interventions (e.g., changing the social environment or minimizing stress or embarrassment); and (3) other kinds of psychological interventions (e.g., encouraging children to join volunteer groups or recreational organizations outside of school). The following are specific teacher strategies for coping with shy and withdrawn students: (1) use interest inventories to determine their interests, then use these interests as bases for conversations or learning activities; (2) display their (good) artwork or assignments; (3) assign them as a partner to a classmate who is popular and engages in frequent contact with peers; (4) check with shy students frequently if they are prone to daydreaming; (5) help shy children to set social development goals and assist them by providing training in social skills; (6) provide them with information needed to develop social insight, suggesting ways for them to initiate productive peer contacts or to respond more effectively to peer initiations; (7) provide them with a designated role that will give them something to do and cause them to interact with others in social situations in which they might otherwise become shy and retreat to the fringes of the group; (8) teach them social "door openers" for greeting others and speaking to them in person or on the telephone; (9) make time to talk with them each day and listen carefully and respond specifically to what they tell you; and (10) use bibliotherapy materials. (LPP)

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Working with Shy or Withdrawn Students

Jere Brophy

Among students who are (compared to their peers) inactive in the classroom, many are well adjusted academically and socially but relatively quiet and content to work independently. Some are problematically shy or withdrawn in varying degrees, and a few may be headed toward schizophrenia. This digest focuses on the middle range of such students, who are commonly described as *shy* (inhibited, lacking in confidence, socially anxious) or *withdrawn* (unresponsive, uncommunicative, or daydreaming).

A degree of shyness is normal whenever social expectations are new or ambiguous. Shyness begins to emerge as a problem if it becomes not merely situational but dispositional, so that the child is *labeled* as shy. Especially if the child internalizes this label, a generalized pattern of shyness may become established and begin to include such additional symptoms as diffidence about entering social situations, discomfort and inhibition in the presence of others, exaggerated self-concern, and increasingly negative social self-concepts (Honig, 1987; Thompson & Rudolph, 1992).

Varieties and Causes of Shyness and Withdrawal in the Classroom

Symptoms of shyness or withdrawal may appear as part of the student's overall personality or as a situation-specific response to a particular stress factor. Children are especially susceptible to self-consciousness in social situations that make them feel conspicuous and psychologically unprotected.

Other types of social unresponsiveness may result from specific experiences or environmental causes. Some children have not developed effective conversational skills because their parents seldom converse with them or respond positively to their verbal initiations, and they have not had much opportunity to interact with peers. This circumstance may explain some of the shyness seen in kindergarten and first grade. Children starting school for the first time may exhibit *school phobia* (usually fear of the unknown or unwillingness to be separated from the parent, rather than a specific negative reaction to the teacher or the school).

Social anxiety can also develop as a ongoing reaction to repeated failure, mistreatment, or rejection from adults or peers. Some students may show good peer group adjustment and ability to interact socially with the teacher, but they may display communication apprehension when asked to answer academic questions, perform in public, or engage in an activity that they know will be evaluated. Finally, many students experience at least temporary social adjustment problems when they change schools or classes.

Suggested Strategies for Coping with Shy or Withdrawn Students

Strategies for coping with shy or withdrawn students include peer involvement, teacher interventions, and other kinds of psychological interventions.

Peer involvement. Several authors have suggested treating shyness and withdrawal through peer involvement (see Rosenberg et al., 1992, for a review). Such efforts might include involving shy students in cross-age tutoring programs, creating opportunities for them to play in pairs with younger children, enlisting peers as confederates to draw out withdrawn children, and involving them in small group, cooperative classroom activities.

Teacher interventions. Brophy (1995) surveyed effective teachers to find out how they responded to shy students. The most commonly mentioned responses included (1) changing the social environment (e.g., seating them among friendly classmates or assigning them to a partner or small group), (2) encouraging or shaping increased responsiveness, (3) minimizing stress or embarrassment, (4) engaging shy students in special activities, and (5) involving them in frequent private talks. Conspicuously absent from these teachers' responses was emphasis on threat or punishment.

Other Interventions. Blanco and Bogacki's (1988) recommendations from school psychologists for coping with general student shyness or withdrawal echo many of these same themes. They suggested encouraging children to join volunteer groups or recreational organizations outside of school; involving them frequently in small-group, cooperative interaction with peers; using them as peer tutors; determining their peer preferences and seating them near preferred peers; leading but not forcing them to communicate; avoiding putting them in situations that would be embarrassing or frightening; and assigning them to messenger roles or other tasks that require communication.

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For students whose withdrawal symptoms include excessive daydreaming, researchers suggest calling on them frequently, standing near them to ensure attention, making sure that they get started successfully on their assignment at the beginning of work time rather than scolding them for daydreaming, stressing the need for attention and participation, and assigning partners to work with them and keep them involved.

The following specific teacher strategies for coping with shy or withdrawn students are suggested by the work of several researchers over the last two decades (Honig, 1987; McIntyre, 1989; Thompson & Rudolph, 1992; Brophy, 1995):

- use interest inventories to determine interests of shy students, then follow up by using these interests as bases for conversations or learning activities;
- display their (good) artwork or assignments for others to see in the classroom;
- assign them as a partner to, or promote their friendship with, a classmate who is popular and engages in frequent contact with peers;
- check with these students frequently if they are prone to daydreaming;
- help shy children to set social development goals and assist them by providing training in assertiveness, initiating interactions with peers, or other social skills;
- provide them with information needed to develop social insight (e.g., explaining that new students often have trouble making friends at first, or that teasing does not necessarily mean that peers do not like you), suggesting ways for them to initiate productive peer contacts or to respond more effectively to peer initiations;
- provide them with a designated role that will give them something to do and cause them to interact with others in social situations in which they might otherwise become shy and retreat to the fringes of the group;
- teach them social "door openers" for greeting others and speaking to them in person or on the telephone, especially assertive requests ("Can I play, too?");
- make time to talk with them each day, even if just for a few minutes, and listen carefully and respond specifically to what they tell you; and
- use bibliotherapy materials such as *The Shy Little Girl*, a story by P. Krasilovsky about a sad and shy girl who becomes more outgoing.

Shy children may need direct instruction in social skills, such as those included in various social skills training programs intended for elementary school students. For more information on such programs, including a description of a program that included collaboration between teachers and parents, see Sheridan, Kratochwill, and Elliott (1990).

Conclusion

Teachers may be able to help shy and withdrawn students considerably by using strategies that are relatively easy to implement and well matched to the teacher's basic role as a helpful instructor to students. These strategies include providing self-concept support, encouragement, and opportunities to develop confidence and comfort in the classroom to shy and inhibited students, as well as closer monitoring, improved nonverbal communication, environmental engineering, and instructive suggestions or demands for improved concentration designed to maintain the attention of students prone to withdrawal or daydreaming. Most teachers seem to develop an intuitive understanding of some of the needs of shy or withdrawn students, but many could meet these needs more effectively by systematically applying the principles and strategies highlighted here.

This digest was adapted from: Brophy, Jere. (1996). *Teaching Problem Students*. New York, Guilford. Adapted with permission of the author.

For More Information

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